

Isaiah 61:10-62-3  
Luke 2:22-40

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Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## THE FIRST SIGN OF RAIN

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is set for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed. *Luke 2:34*

The Christmas story from Luke seems like a burst of sunlight after the brooding darkness of Advent. But then the Gospel lesson for the first week after Christmas finds storm clouds looming again. Luke's shepherds have returned to the flocks that they abandoned on the hillsides, the angel voices are stilled, and the intense images of celestial lights, heavenly choirs and Gabriel's prophetic voice have given way to a familiar normalcy as history settles again into its old routine. Then the story takes a turn, the way—quite without warning, one can feel the air turning damp and chill even before the clouds roll in. It's a dispiriting piece of news in the conversation in the temple precincts, where Mary and Joseph have come to dedicate their firstborn son to God. In an aside old Simeon tells Mary, in a darkly figurative image, about a sword that shall pierce her heart, and it's the first sign of a storm in Jesus' story.

Together, these ancient figures, elderly Simeon and Anna shuffling about the temple precincts, represent the law and the prophets, the whole corpus of Jewish tradition and Scripture. The old man, Simeon, represents the law which the priests were charged with upholding. The aged prophetess, Anna, represents those like Moses who spoke for God to Israel, that is, the prophets (Luke, the most inclusive of the gospels, will use this technique repeatedly of back to back stories involving a man then a woman throughout his Gospel). Both Anna and Simeon realize whom they have been immensely privileged to see, wrapped in that borrowed blue blanket—the Messiah of God. The words of Simeon, about their baby being the Messiah, seem to confuse and startle the parents. But what especially alarms both of them, and the first time reader, is the news that this baby Jesus will not have an easy road of it. He is to be a sign of God that will be opposed, the cause of a sword of affliction and grief that will pierce Mary's heart. We can only suspect that this is directed to Mary because Joseph will not be around into Jesus' adulthood. Certainly, Joseph never really figures in the Gospel narratives after this.

It would certainly have been nice to sustain the happy mood of Luke's story for a time: entertaining Jesus' prospects; cherishing the good he will bring, the fragmented lives restored, the people healed, the lives ennobled, changed and quickened to a new resolve toward God by his teaching. Could we not have lingered with these thoughts just a while longer? But the Gospel will not play with us. It will not dally with romantic sentiments. This is not Hollywood or Disney World. It is Gospel—"good news"—for all its ambiguity, a tale that knows that rain precedes the silver lining, that winter's storm goes before the flower of spring. For life is much that way. And part of what this Gospel tells us is that suffering *is*, and is not to be side stepped if we would grow. You must have noticed, especially on sidewalks in older neighborhoods, how the hair-like tendrils in the roots of trees will lift concrete slabs in sidewalks to find nourishment for the larger body. Self-sacrifice and suffering are not wise things to side step. Few would consider timidity a virtue, because it hardly breeds strength of character.

Still, to look upon this baby, mewling and drooling in its little blanket, and say such things to Mary! Was that really necessary? Could she not have discovered in her own time what must become of her son, that he would indeed be the consolation of Israel, their longed for redemption—even at that cost that loomed ahead? But then how much more slowly we would learn the lesson that Scripture wishes to teach us—that suffering is redemptive. It is not that God sends suffering upon us to test us, or to strengthen us. I do not

know such a God. Suffering is simply in the nature of things, like storm clouds that promise to nourish the earth. Suffering is part of life. Yet it can have the *effect* of maturing us, and the Bible would rather that we know this up front. If all maturing, spiritual and otherwise, were left to hindsight—an afterthought, it would be hard indeed to encounter suffering as potentially redemptive.

The Gospel wisely decided that we need to know this up front; even through one who is only forty days old. Suffering is not the only path that a life will take, but it can be the most redemptive, the one that brings us face to face with ourselves, our weakness, and through God's wisdom shows us the way to our strength.

Each Saturday as I work on my sermon, I usually take a break around 2 p.m. and drive over to the Farmers Market in Strafford. There is a little stall at the end of Clyde Weaver's meat stand where the ladies make the best hoagies: turkey and Swiss cheese and with spicy mustard and hot pepper relish, and balsamic vinegar over lettuce and tomatoes, that would make the angels drool. Ummmh!

As there's opportunity, we chat a little about this and that, the ladies and I. One day, when I first started going there, as she passed me the wrapped hoagie Bernadette ("Bernie") said, "Something to drink with that?" I paused just long enough to let her make a suggestion. She mused, "Wouldn't a nice cold beer go well with that."

"Not in the pastor's office on a sermon break," I said, with a smile. Well, she almost fell on the floor, partly from laughing so hard, partly from embarrassment. She hadn't known that I was a pastor. But that knowledge opened up some frank conversations in later weeks about her families' health struggles. One of the ladies was the mother of Billy Miller, a professional lacrosse player a few years ago with the Philadelphia Wings. A few months before, Billy and his wife had their first child, a beautiful baby girl whom they called Lander, with big bright eyes and a winning smile—and an immense tumor in her brain. Surgery did what it could, but the road afterward was emotionally wrenching for the whole family. They all seem tremendously close, and through their shared affliction they drew an enormous circle of love and affection into their lives from friends and strangers. This little infant reached out silently to bless a small multitude with her extraordinary resilience and private courage. Her grandmother told me that the family got long letters from young people in particular, in which they pour out the faith and hope for little Lander. Just before Christmas the see-saw seemed to be heading on an upswing, and Billy and his wife and little Lander were going to be Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus in their church pageant. The whole church family was so excited. Then the next week, right before Christmas, the grandmother said it didn't look at all good. Things had taken a bad turn, Lander had to be put on morphine and couldn't be baby Jesus in the pageant. It would be a matter of days, they thought; right at Christmas, too. But at least she was home.

The Sunday after Christmas I wasn't feeling especially hungry, but I felt a need to go by anyway, at least I could offer my condolences. She was still with us, her grandmother said, if only by a thread. And of course she didn't make the pageant. Instead, all the lambs, the shepherds, the wise men and the townspeople came to the house where the baby was, and they formed a great circle and went round the crib, each kissing the baby, each drawing a private strength from her courage, each strangely ennobled by the mystery of her suffering. She said they almost had to restrain two of the characters who kept sneaking back in the line to plant another kiss.

All those people! All those lives so touched! There's something so redemptive about suffering. And never more so through the suffering of an innocent.

Amen.